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ABSTRACT

As early as 1993 James Madison University realized that a significant revision was necessary in its undergraduate core curriculum. A General Education Committee was formed which undertook a review and evaluation of 1352 objectives; the Committee produced and published a list of approximately 100 specific learning objectives. These learning objectives were then refined into clusters: Cluster 1, Skills for the 21st Century; Cluster 2, Arts and Humanities; Cluster 3, The Natural World; Cluster 4, Social and Cultural Processes; and Cluster 5, Individuals in the Human Community. The university then undertook the establishment of the office which would manage and supervise the design, development, delivery, and evaluation of the General Education program. All matriculated students are required to complete Cluster 1 during their freshman year. The faculty has created "Cluster 1 packages"--a package is a nine hour curriculum of course work, drawn from a variety of academic departments. Speech communication is the only discipline represented in every package and has evolved into the central player in Cluster 1. The 1997-98 academic year was the first year of the General Education program and the first full year of Cluster 1 implementation. Over 3000 freshmen were accommodated during the first two semesters, and the program's success is being measured by an intensive assessment program. The principal challenges facing Cluster 1 in general and speech communication in particular are continuing to refine the focus of cluster learning objective statements, the creation of appropriate assessment instruments, and the implementation of learning activities in cluster packages. (Contains 6 references. Appended is the Cluster 1 learning objectives list.) (NKA)

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The Role of Speech Communication in the Development of Learning Objectives in the General Education Program at James Madison University

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As early as 1993 James Madison University realized that a significant revision was necessary in its undergraduate core curriculum. An Assessment Steering Committee presented a report to the university which contained recommendations critical of the core curriculum in place. These recommendations and the committee's analysis motivated the university to undertake a major overhaul of the core curriculum (Assessment Steering Committee, 1993). Of course, the Assessment Steering Committee's report was not altogether unanticipated because there was, and continues to be, a national debate calling for significant revisions in the way higher education has traditionally delivered instruction, the content of that instruction, and the way in which programs are held

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accountable (Gardiner, 1994; Marien, 1996). Gaff (1991) and Munitz (1995) have contributed to the national debate by calling attention to a growing trend emphasizing graduate education at the expense of undergraduate education, out dated programs and curriculum, poorly defined measures of accountability and quality, and a general decreased attention on undergraduate teaching.

In spring 1994 a General Education Committee was formed which included membership from across the university including faculty, staff, and administration. This committee drafted a statement containing sixteen broad goals for general education in three domains: knowledge, skills, and experiences. The university community was invited to draft and recommend specific learning objectives designed to achieve the outlined goals in response to the committee's sixteen general education goals. Thirteen hundred fifty-two statements of objective were received from 140 faculty representing more than 30 academic programs.

The General Education Committee undertook a review of these 1352 objectives and evaluated them considering the following questions.

(1) Is this knowledge, skill, or experience expected of all college graduates?

(2) Is this knowledge, skill, or experience expected of all graduates from James Madison University?

(3) Is the objective worded to communicate the intended learning?

and (4) Does the objective support all major and professional programs? (Reynolds, et.al., 1998)

This review was completed in the spring semester 1995 and produced a list of approximately 100 specific learning objectives which were published for the faculty in

May 1995. Following publication of the refined and focused list of 100 objectives, public hearing and other means for receiving comment were undertaken. The committee, using information gained from public comment and from their own deliberations, further refined and focused the specific learning objectives by organizing them into five cluster areas. The five clusters may be roughly described as follows.

Cluster One, Skills for the 21st Century, includes objectives specific to oral and written communication, critical thinking, interpersonal communication technology, and information retrieval and evaluation. A complete list of the 19 Cluster One objectives can be found in the appendix.

Cluster Two, Arts and Humanities, includes objectives traditionally assigned to humanities and fine arts disciplines, including literature.

Cluster Three, The Natural World, includes objectives traditionally attached to the natural and physical sciences as well as to mathematics.

Cluster Four, Social and Cultural Processes, includes objectives usually attached to the social sciences including political science and history.

Cluster Five, Individuals in the Human Community, including objectives usually assigned to disciplines focusing on human growth and development.

By the fall of 1995 the university undertook the task of establishing the university office which would manage and supervise the design, development, delivery, and evaluation of the general education program. A search was initiated to name a Dean of General Education and at the completion of that search, searches for Cluster Coordinators were undertaken. At the close of the 1995-1996 academic year the General Education

Program at James Madison University was being administered by a Dean and each cluster area had a coordinator in place.

It is important, inasmuch as this paper focuses on the role of speech communication in the development of General Education at James Madison University, to emphasize that no individual faculty member from the School of Speech Communication served on the original General Education Committee or served in any capacity of significance to the development of the new General Education Program. The first instance of a speech communication faculty member serving in a significant role in General Education was when this author was named to serve in the role of Cluster One Coordinator.

An additional characteristic describing Cluster One is that Cluster One is defined as the "freshman cluster." All students matriculated at James Madison University are required to complete Cluster One during their freshman year, either the fall semester or the spring semester. In addition, the original plan was to require that Cluster One be completed in a single semester by completing a nine hour integrated curriculum package.

The first task assumed by the new Cluster One Coordinator was to work with university faculty encouraging the creation of Cluster One packages. A "package" is a nine hour curriculum of course work, potentially drawn from a variety of academic disciplines or departments, which together accomplish the nineteen learning objectives defining Cluster One. It should be understood that no academic unit, department, or discipline was assumed to have priority for participation in the delivery of Cluster One instruction. The author encouraged all university departments to consider the potential for their involvement in Cluster One instruction and specifically encouraged departments

from education and business disciplines to participate in the delivery of oral communication instruction. However, the only academic unit to come forward willing to present oral communication instruction was the School of Speech Communication.

The work of designing and preparing instructional packages, ready for implementation in the Fall 1997 semester, was intense. The university timetable for implementing the new General Education program was with the freshman class entering Fall 1997. This deadline required that Cluster One be fully operational to accommodate freshman registration during the 1997 summer session.

Ultimately, five packages were designed. These packages are:

Package A, Effective Arguments:

Basic Human Communication (speech communication)

Reading and Composition (English)

Critical Thinking (philosophy)

Package B, Critical Skills in the World of Business

Basic Human Communication (speech communication)

Reading and Composition (English)

Business Decision making in a Modern Society (business)

Package C, Language and Communication

Basic Human Communication (speech communication)

Reading and Composition (English)

Foreign Language (Spanish, French, or German)

Package D, Critical Skills and Historical Inquiry

Basic Human Communication (speech communication)

Information Sources and Tools (information decision science)

Seminar in Thinking and Writing: An Introduction to the 21st Century (history)

Package E, Media Literacy and Communication

Basic Human Communication (speech communication)

Reading and Composition (English)

Mediated Communication: Issues and Skills (media arts and design)

It should be noted that speech communication is the only discipline and academic department represented in every package. Clearly, this was not by design. However, speech communication has evolved to be, perhaps, the central player in Cluster One in several important ways. Obviously, the selection of a speech communication faculty member as Cluster One Coordinator signals the central role of oral communication in the program. In addition, the presence of speech communication in each package and the deliberate refusal of any other university program to assume a central role in the delivery of oral communication instruction is noteworthy.

The 1997-1998 academic year was the first year of the General Education program and the first full year of Cluster One implementation. Over 3000 freshmen were accommodated during the two semesters and the program's success is being measured by way of an intensive assessment program. We are now nearing the end of our third semester of full implementation and it is generally agreed that we are achieving success. The principle challenges currently facing Cluster One in general and speech communication in particular are continuing to refine the focus of cluster learning

objective statements, the creation of appropriate assessment instruments, and the continuing integration of learning activities in cluster packages.

The program continues with the initial five packages. However, there has been some modification. Because some incoming freshman have intense demands placed upon them by their major programs, some students are permitted to spread their Cluster One package across the two semesters in their first year. For example, in Package A, students may complete the three courses in any order during the freshman year. In Package B, students may complete the writing course either before or after the business and communication course, but he business and communication course must be taken during the same semester. In Package C, the oral communication course and the foreign language course must be taken together but the writing course may be taken before or after if it is necessary. In Package D, the writing course and the IDS course must be taken at the same time and the oral communication course may only be separated from the package if it is completed prior to the writing and IDS pieces. Package E courses may not be taken independently of each other.

While the original conception of Cluster One was to have students complete a highly integrated and coordinated nine hour package of instruction, it has been necessary to relax that requirement. The intention remains that freshman will complete the nine hour package Cluster One curriculum in a single semester and students are advised in that way. To the extent that some students have found it necessary to disconnect the courses in some packages, it has been a challenge to the faculty to find ways to continue the coordination and integration of instruction in each package.

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Appendix

Cluster One: Skills for the 21st Century: Learning Objectives

A student who has completed cluster One should be able to:

- evaluate information sources in terms of accuracy, authority, bias, and relevance in written and oral contexts;
- use information effectively by adapting it to a communicative purpose, organizing it, and acknowledging and properly documenting sources;
- describe and employ the components of communication theories and the variables involved in the process of human communication;
- use standard conventions of written and spoken English to communicate information and ideas, using rhetorical strategies appropriate to purpose, audience, and content;
- use oral and written communication to analyze critically thoughts, feelings, experiences, and opinions;
- display interpersonal communication skills in groups by defining problems, eliciting and recognizing member contributions, synthesizing opinions, mediating conflicts, and reaching consensus;
- demonstrate dyadic interaction skills including how to negotiate and resolve conflicts;
- identify and employ inductive and deductive reasoning and evaluate the application of each;
- in any written or oral message, identify, paraphrase, and evaluate the thesis, the essential supporting evidence and assumptions, the unstated assumptions, and the conclusions;
- paraphrase oral and written messages to demonstrate listening and reading skills;
- use oral and written language to create a text that includes a clear, strong, and significant thesis; adequate and relevant supporting evidence; appropriate documentation; and clear and valid assumptions and conclusion;
- distinguish and analyze various forms of oral and written discourse (questions, exclamations, commands, declarative, such as description, explanation, argument) and their roles in critical thinking;
- identify and evaluate typical fallacies in oral and written communication;
- demonstrate the mastery of writing and speaking processes including such essential practices as invention, arrangement, revision, and editing;
- use computer technology to create a document that contains textual, tabular, and graphical or pictorial elements;
- use computers to communicate interactively both locally and globally;
- speak publicly using presentational software and technology;
- formulate and conduct an information search that includes a variety of reference sources, such as encyclopedias, library catalogs, indexes, bibliographies, statistics sources, government publications, and resources available on the Internet;
- demonstrate effective and appropriate self-analysis and self-directed learning skills.